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# Writing Myself Home: Migrant Well-being and Expressive Writing <sup>1</sup>

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# Writing Myself Home: Migrant Well-being and Expressive Writing<sup>1</sup>

Narraciones desde mi morada: el bienestar y la escritura expresiva de los migrantes

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**Abstract:** This article argues that increased national and local cultural policy measures need to be taken to improve migrant well-being. As part of a larger research project, it suggests the implementation of expressive writing workshops, following an adapted version of Pennebaker's methodology (Pennebaker and Evans 2014; Sexton and Pennebaker 2009), as an effective and economically viable local cultural policy intervention. The issue is addressed with particular reference to León, Guanajuato (with the specific case study of two workshops conducted) where migration is rapidly increasing yet under-researched. Furthermore, emphasis is placed on migrant women, as a group of double vulnerability. It will be shown that, albeit far from presenting a miracle cure, expressive writing workshops can contribute significantly towards the increased well-being, integration and thus overall development of some migrant women. Moreover, they can effectively expand our knowledge about the struggles and benefits of the (psychological) process of migration.

**Keywords:** cultural policy, expressive writing, women, well-being, development, Leon, Guanajuato.

**Resumen:** El artículo enfatiza la necesidad de políticas culturales nacionales y locales para mejorar el bienestar de migrantes. Como parte de una investigación más extensa, propone la implementación de talleres de escritura expresiva, siguiendo una versión adaptada de la metodología de Pennebaker (Pennebaker and Evans, 2014; Sexton and Pennebaker, 2009) como una intervención de política cultural a nivel local, efectiva y económicamente viable. Se llevaron a cabo dos estudios de caso en el municipio de León (ubicado en el estado de Guanajuato, México) en donde la migración ha aumentado rápidamente; sin embargo, este fenómeno ha sido poco estudiado. El trabajo se centra, además, en mujeres migrantes, como grupo de doble vulnerabilidad. Los resultados demuestran que, aunque lejos de ser una medida milagrosa, los talleres de escritura expresiva pueden contribuir de manera significativa a favorecer el bienestar, la integración y, por ende, el desarrollo general de algunas mujeres migrantes. Asimismo, dichos talleres pueden ayudar a la comprensión de los problemas y beneficios del proceso (psicológico) de la migración.

**Palabras clave:** políticas culturales, escritura expresiva, bienestar, mujeres, León, Guanajuato.

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## INTRODUCTION

This paper argues that increased national and local cultural policy measures need to be taken to improve migrant well-being. As part of a larger research project in process, it suggests the implementation of expressive writing workshops, following an adapted version of Pennebaker's methodology (Pennebaker & Evans, 2014; Sexton & Pennebaker, 2009), as a micro-level, yet effective and economically viable policy intervention. The paper addresses this issue with particular reference to the city of León, Mexico (with the specific case study of two

workshops conducted) where migration is rapidly increasing yet arguably as yet under researched. Furthermore, emphasis is placed on migrant women, as a group of double vulnerability. It will be shown that, albeit far from presenting a miracle cure, expressive writing workshops can contribute significantly towards the increased well-being, integration and thus overall development of some migrant women. Also, such micro-level, local cultural policy interventions can expand our knowledge about the struggles and benefits of the (psychological) process of migration in a very simple manner that is often experienced as increasing migrants' well-being in its own right.

The research here presented was decided upon in response to an intersection of different crises, neglects and negations, on an international as well as a national (Mexican) level. Firstly, there is a growing consensus that we are currently living in the age of migration (Castles, de Haas & Miller, 2014), and witnessing a veritable "migration crisis" that is here to stay (Blair, 2016). Indeed, we are facing nationalistic backlashes caused by frequently discontent members of host populations (see, for instance, Garavoglia, 2015), "failed" or insufficient measures of integration (Debating Europe, 2015) and a striking lack of well-being among immigrant populations, especially among women (Bernstein, Cho, Cho and Roh, 2012; Delara, 2016).

Secondly, there has been a certain lack of cultural policies addressing these issues. This has been noted, for instance, with regard to Europe (Xuereb, 2011), but may be stated even more forcefully in relation to Mexico, where cultural policy measures dealing with the country's rapidly increasing migration rate have been virtually absent (see, for instance, Cultural Policy Plan until 2018, as discussed by Sanchez, 2014). The present study is thus one of many needed attempts to counter-act the negation and neglect of the matters at hand.

Thirdly, nearly half of the world's migrant population is female (United Nations [ UN ], 2016) yet traditional research and policies related to migration have tended to take the male migrant as a norm, a fact which has only been slowly started to be remedied (Kofman *et al.*, 2000). As a result, there is still a need for more research, as an "Increased understanding of the situation of migrant women should provide the basis for the formulation of policies and programs that promote their equality with migrant men and that safeguard their well-being" ( UN , n.d.). Again, this investigation aims to contribute to such an increased understanding by focusing exclusively on women and trying to document and analyze their process of displacement and the effect that expressive writing may have on their well-being. Even though, as will be shown, the reduced number of participants and the choice of qualitative research methodologies does not allow for any gendered generalizations, future research – for instance, working comparatively with male participants only - may start to reveal a more distinctly gendered dimension to the issues discussed.

Forth, with regard to Mexico – and despite many notable exceptions, especially concerning Central Americans in Mexico (e.g. Cruz, 2011; Reyes, 2014) - migration policy and research has traditionally been

preoccupied with Mexico as a country of emigration, rather than a host country for immigrants. This focus is somewhat comprehensible, given the fact that Mexicans actually constituted the largest group of international migrants for a while (La Jornada, 2013) and currently form the world's second biggest "diaspora" (UN, 2016). Nevertheless, while still low in comparison to, for instance, the United States or Europe, the number of migrants arriving in Mexico is rapidly augmenting. The "Anuario de migración y remesas, México, 2014" (Yearbook of migration and remittances, Mexico, 2014) – based on data from 2010 – shows that Mexico is host to 961.000 (almost a million) immigrants, which means that immigration doubled over ten years; in 2000 there were still only 493.000 (Fundación BBVA, 2014).

The city this paper focuses on, León, is the largest city of the state of Guanajuato, where a similar increase of immigrants can be traced. According to the Mexican center of statistics, the Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía [Inegi], the presence of international migrants also doubled within a decade, moving from 18.359 in 2000 to 39.207 in 2010 (Notimex, 2012). In addition, it is believed that figures will keep rapidly rising (Notimex, 2012),<sup>2</sup> especially with regard to a constant increase of Japanese immigrants (Hernández Monreal, 2015).

Finally, as to the matter of expressive writing, the field displays no signs of lack of research. On the contrary, in a list of references that is unfortunately no longer available, Pennebaker (2013) names more than 300 related studies. Already in 2005, Baikie & Wilhelm refer to more than 70 studies attesting to the multiple benefits of this form of creative expression. However, these studies are often quantitative in nature, psychological in orientation and have, again, with a few exceptions (see, for instance, Bernstein et al., 2012) rarely addressed issues of immigrant well-being and cultural policy implications. The paper thus strives to deal with several somewhat neglected or under-researched issues at their intersection. It hopes to be of general interest, as well as helping to draw attention to the issue of migration, in Mexico, before a local migrant crisis occurs.

Moving onto this paper's methodology, it is interdisciplinary in nature, drawing both from theoretical sources and, as said, two expressive writing workshops conducted. The theoretical research relies on general migration studies, psychological and psychoanalytical accounts of migration, studies on happiness, well-being and development, cultural policy studies, as well as expressive and creative writing studies. While possibly weakening a clear theoretical focus, I believe it is high time to recognize migration as an issue of great complexity and multiple theoretical and practical issues and implications, where previously separate disciplines need to re-unite to urgently provide more holistic studies and problem solutions.

As to the practice-side of the research, details regarding the workshops will be outlined later on. For the moment, suffice it to say that each was composed of exercises based on the classical expressive writing methodology by Pennebaker (Pennebaker & Evans, 2014; Sexton &

Pennebaker, 2009), as well as additional creative/reflexive writing exercises which also acted as a basis for qualitative research and (narrative) analysis (Andrews, Squire, & Tamboukou 2008).<sup>3</sup>

It will become evident that, albeit apparently a simply, small-scale measure, the implementation of expressive writing workshops can – as arguably many cultural interventions – prove to be an efficient way to improve migrant development by connecting the public and the private world, increasing both the psychological well-being of participants and their intercultural understanding which “involves awareness, knowledge and understanding of many aspects of other cultures, for the purpose of living together peacefully and harmoniously” (de Leo, 2010, p. 12). As such, it seems to act in accordance with the recommendations by the Migration Policy Institute that “local policies for integration that build on active interaction between immigrants and local society should receive the highest priority” (Penninx, 2003, Recognize the local context, para. 1)

## GLANCING AT THEORETICAL BASICS

The paper will rely on the International Journal of Cultural Policy Studies’ definition of cultural policy as “the promotion or prohibition of cultural practices and values by governments, corporations, other institutions and individuals” (International Journal of Cultural Policy Studies, 2016, Aims & Scope, para.1). Migration will be broadly defined as “The movement of a person or a group of persons, either across an international border, or within a State” (International Organization for Migration [ IOM ], 2016). Despite the growing policy interest in the matter, well-being remains difficult to define, as there are many different, possible approaches ( IOM , 2013). Nonetheless, the *World Migration Report 2013* is based on a notion that identifies “career, social connections, personal economics, health, and community as the main contributors to a person’s overall subjective well-being” ( IOM , 2013, p. 38). While this idea is certainly useful, the present paper relies chiefly on individual conceptions of well-being as provided by workshop participants. However, in an attempt to give theoretical depth to the matter, it relates individual concepts to aspects, which the field of happiness studies (and some cultural policy interest in the matter) considers as highly significant for increased well-being, such as social connection (e.g. Carter, 2008), gratitude (e.g. Watkins *et al.*, 2003), self-compassion (e.g. Neff, 2011) and catharsis (Belfiore, 2016). Also, while individual well-being is in itself an important development aim ( IOM , 2013), the more “social” concept of migrant integration, here understood as “the process by which immigrants become accepted into society, both as individuals and as groups” (Penninx, 2003, para. 2) is also regarded as a key development objective and intrinsically connected to migrant well-being in its own right.

### *Migration and well-being*

While many people leave home to increase their well-being, displacement can cause a host of often serious practical and psychological problems. In the psychological and psychoanalytical literature on the matter, there appears to be a consensus that migration (especially, but not exclusively when of a forced nature) entails a number of profound and multilayered losses that need to be mourned (Martín, 2011). Apart from the abandonment of one's home and many physical things (Akhtar, 2014), there is also the leaving behind of family and friends (Akhtar, 2014), the loss of one's language, as well as often one's former work/role and identity (Ginzberg and Ginzberg, 1989). Moreover, "gaining" is also a struggle for many migrants. Common difficulties are finding work and friends; understanding and adapting to new cultural norms, as well as learning a new language – even if the language of the new country is, apparently, the same (Ginzberg and Ginzberg, 1989). In addition, migrant well-being is also affected by the reception of the host country population. Indeed, according to Green and Staerklé (2013) "there is ample empirical evidence showing that perceiving oneself as a target or victim of majority discrimination" increases "depressive symptoms, distress and anxiety" (p. 861). Often, migration thus becomes a traumatic experience (Akhtar, 2014) that needs to be addressed both individually and socially. Nevertheless, as shall be seen, migration can also have positive effects on well-being, a fact which – despite notable exceptions (e.g. Melzer, 2011; Nowok *et al.*, 2013) – seems to have received less research attention.

As to Mexico, it is known that many migrants suffer considerably during their life in or passage through this country, especially those of Central American origin (e.g. Cruz, 2011; Reyes, 2014).<sup>4</sup> A study carried out by Parametría highlights how migrants are sometimes victims of extreme human rights abuses (Parametría, 2016, Asesinato de Migrantes) and, less dramatically yet crucially, shows that many more Mexicans worry about their compatriots abroad than about foreigners in "their" own country (Parametría, 2016, Migrando a la discriminación). Also, according to the "Encuesta Nacional sobre Discriminación en México, Enadis 2010 – Resultados sobre personas migrantes" (National Survey on Discrimination in Mexico, Enadis 2010 – Results regarding migrants), there are varying discriminatory attitudes against migrants in place. On the one hand, many Mexicans perceive themselves as generous and open towards those who come from abroad. But when, for instance, asked if foreigners contribute towards divisions within the country, more than 70% of those interviewed answered in the affirmative (Consejo Nacional para Prevenir la Discriminación [Conapred], 2011). Although the most vulnerable group of immigrants comes from Central America, the study also shows that immigrants from other countries such as the United States and China are sometimes affected by discriminatory attitudes within the host society (Conapred).<sup>5</sup>



### *Expressive writing and well-being*

Differently from creative writing, expressive writing typically asks participants to produce specific forms, yet without any aesthetic expectations or worries about spelling, revisions and corrections. The key method of expressive writing used during the workshops is based on a classic program elaborated by Pennebaker. Here, participants are asked, during four consecutive days, to write for 20 minutes non-stop about conflicts or traumas most relevant to their present lives, expressing their deepest thoughts and emotions (Pennebaker and Evans, 2014). Through the so-called “Flip-Out Rule” (idem) (the idea that participants do not write or stop writing about something that is too upsetting), care is taken that participants do not suffer beyond a momentary sadness often attributed to the overall therapeutic effect of this practice. Also, it is a basic rule that the text produced is not to be read by anyone other than the writers themselves. The method is thus both simple and intense.

Interestingly, it is not as yet fully known why and how expressive writing works (Sexton and Pennebaker, 2009). In their review of relevant studies, Baikie and Wilhelm (2005) suggest – yet discard – the cathartic effect of disclosure writing (How does it work? Box 4). They mention mixed support for its functioning through counter-working “emotional inhibition and confrontation” (Baikie and Wilhelm, 2005) and through repeated exposure (and therefore gradually less emotional reaction) to negative experiences (Baikie and Wilhelm, 2005). According to them, however, it is more likely that expressive writing is effective because it helps to create a coherent life story and assists in cognitive processing, i.e. the ability “to organize and structure the traumatic memory, resulting in more adaptive, integrated schemas about self, others and the world” (Baikie and Wilhelm, 2005).

Despite this lasting insecurity as to why expressive writing works, there is solid evidence that it does. While it is not recommended for serious psychological problems (which need the appropriate psychological/psychiatric treatment), Baikie and Wilhelm list the following, proven, physical, psychological and social benefits, obtained by expressive writing interventions:

Fewer stress related visits to the doctor; improved immune system functioning; reduced blood pressure; improved lung function; improved liver function; fewer days in hospital; improved mood/affect; feeling of greater psychological well-being; reduced depressive symptoms before examinations, fewer post-traumatic intrusion and avoidance symptoms, [...] reduced absenteeism from work; quicker re-employment after job loss; improved working memory; improved sporting performance; higher students’ grade point average; altered social and linguistic behaviour (2005, Box 2, Longer-term benefits of expressive writing).

I have quoted this at length to illustrate that – while findings are not always unambiguous (Baikie and Wilhelm, 2005) - it has already been concluded that “a drug intervention reporting medium effect sizes similar to those found for expressive writing [...] would be regarded as a major medical advance” (idem). What is more, the list provided is not

conclusive. Pennebaker, for instance, also names reduced anxiety and overall depressive symptoms as further proven benefits (Pennebaker and Evans, 2014). Expressive writing may therefore indeed be considered a method of strikingly low cost and efficiency, arguably turning it into a very attractive and viable migrant intervention and micro-level cultural policy measure addressing migrant well-being.

To adapt this basic methodology to the specific case of migrant women and some of the key “neglects” and “crises” associated with this area, a few additions were made to this classical methodology during the workshops conducted. As mentioned, and to be discussed in more detail, these included creative/reflective writing exercises and discussions about the themes of well-being and migration, as well as a number of evaluative questionnaires. These amplifications were motivated by the need to render the workshops more socially interactive and hence both intercultural and potentially “integrative”; and to make them provide additional, qualitative information on the migration process of women.

## **PRACTICE: TWO EXPRESSIVE WRITING WORKSHOPS**

Two workshops were conducted in March and April 2016. The course in March was presented on-line through a Moodle platform and took place over five consecutive days; the one in April was held in the city of León, in Alemanízate, the German Cultural Centre, over four consecutive days.<sup>6</sup> These two formats were chosen to experiment with and tease out their respective advantages and disadvantages for this pilot study.<sup>7</sup>

Both workshops were made up of migrant and non-migrant women, with distinctions blurring as many of those who had not migrated internationally had significant experiences of national migrations.<sup>8</sup> There were 16 participants in the online workshop and 11 in the local one.<sup>9</sup> Because of a considerable lack of infrastructure for migrants in León, participants were recruited mainly through social and personal networks,<sup>10</sup> although flyers and posters were also used.

Due to lack of geographical restrictions, the make-up of the online workshop was more international in nature, consisting of participants with nationalities including Mexican, US American, British, French, German and Austrian. Ten of the participants were or had been until recently residents of the city of León; but there were others resident in Austria, the United States and France. The workshop hence maintained its key focus on women in León, while at the same time deliberately allowing and encouraging international participation.<sup>11</sup> As to the local workshop, it was comprised of three women from Japan, three Germans, and five Mexican women resident in León. Both workshops were led by myself - a multiple migrant from Austria and with permanent residency status in Mexico.

All participants were asked to carry out Pennebaker’s classical method over four consecutive days. Following recommendations made by Baikie



& Wilhelm (2005), they were instructed to write about any kind of trauma/conflict, whether related to their migration experience or not (Box 5 Suggestions for the clinical use of expressive writing). Apart from these basic exercises, participants were asked to complete reflexive writing tasks about their well-being and its connection to migration, the “dark” and “light” side of their displacement and, in the case of the on-line workshop, future steps for increased well-being they would like to take. Participants were also encouraged to exchange their ideas on the subjects raised, through an online forum or face-to-face discussions. Finally, every workshop session was concluded by an evaluation questionnaire. The latter was an extended version of the questionnaire provided by Pennebaker as part of his classical methodology (Pennebaker & Evans, 2014), with additional questions asking about the effect of the reflexive writing exercises, as well as the workshop session as a whole. Also, whereas Pennebaker’s evaluation system is numerical, participants were given the option to answer the questions by assigning numbers and/or verbally. The great majority actually replied in well reflected written passages. In addition, at the end of each workshop, extensive evaluation questionnaires were handed out.

Both work-shops were bilingual, with instructions given in English and Spanish. Nevertheless, these were the languages used for inter-group communication only. Due to the extremely private nature of Pennebaker’s expressive writing method, participants were told to write in any language they wanted, with most choosing to complete the expressive writing exercises in their mother tongues and the reflexive tasks in English, Spanish and occasionally German.<sup>12</sup>

#### *Expressive writing workshops as sources of qualitative information regarding the migration process*

Given the limited scope of the present investigation, the qualitative information regarding subjective well-being and migration obtained was interesting and satisfactory. The reflexive exercises and discussions had been planned to fulfill a double function; modeled upon basic research strategies such as the open-ended questionnaire and the focus group, they were aimed at both providing research data and, ideally, well-being for the participants. While the latter was not achieved in all cases, a few participants mentioned that answering the reflexive exercises was difficult, e.g. A.R. Face-to-Face workshop, 2016 (to preserve the privacy of participants, all initials are false and used for distinction, only); others commented that the written reflections and, especially, the exchange with other participants proved to be among the most valuable parts of the workshop.<sup>13</sup> As to the former, insight on the individual experiences of the migrants helped to confirm findings in the existent literature on migration, as well as occasionally expand upon it, especially through particular local aspects that seem to affect migrant well-being. Also, given a lack of knowledge on the positive psychological sides of migration, much was revealed with regard to this, with geographical displacement evolving

as a highly complex, and multi-faceted phenomenon, affecting well-being in many nuanced and at times contradictory ways.

Starting with a brief over-view of participants' conceptions of well-being, responses were varied, arguably illustrating the value of allowing for individual definitions to arise. While some were reminiscent of the definition provided in the *World Migration Report 2013* (e.g. "to work, to make money, to have time with family, long holiday[s], a comfortable house" [O.N. Face-to-Face workshop, 2016], others emphasized the pleasure of learning ("For me, well-being is learning, learning through experience, no matter what the lesson taught by life might be" [S.N. Face-to-face workshop, 2016]), or the need for self-acceptance/appreciation ("because you can have everything but not feel good about yourself" <sup>14</sup> [G.L. Face-to-face workshop, 2016]). Indeed, one participant stated that: "Well-being, for me, translates into how good we feel about ourselves, how well we nourish our body, our mind and, even, daring to declare its existence, our soul" (C.E. Face-to-face workshop, 2016).

As to the difficult or "dark" side of migration, one participant gave an interesting summary of the complicated and often disappointing interconnection between displacement and well-being. As she wrote: "I came to the city of León looking for increased well-being for myself and my family (my partner and pet), but in the process, there was a moment when I felt a complete lack of well-being, I felt I was in a situation that was worse than before" (S.N. Face-to-face workshop, 2016).

Indeed, many workshop members struggled with practical and psychological problems as previously outlined. Several participants commented that they missed family and friends <sup>15</sup> and had severe language difficulties. Another issue that was raised on various occasions was money – especially in the case of two women who could not work due to their migration status and lack of knowledge of Spanish. Indeed, one of them wrote in her reflection that for her, well-being would be: "To have [my] own money. Because I can't work in Mexico. I want to speak [a] foreign language. Especially English and Spanish. I want friends" (O.N. Face-to-face workshop, 2016). Other issues raised were having to work harder and having less time because of being a foreigner (H.B. Face-to-face workshop, 2016); struggling with (private) health-insurance payments and not being able to work in one's original profession because it is comparatively very badly paid in Mexico. The latter two reflect problems unlikely to be covered by more universalist approaches to the sufferings of migration (such as the one's by Ginzberg & Ginzberg, 1989), as they arguably arise from a concrete difference between different national health and job valuation/retribution systems. In fact, I believe they also reflect aspects of another highly understudied migration trend, that from the "North" to the "South" (IOM, 2013).

On a more psychological plane - apart from loneliness and (di-) stress caused by the various difficulties mentioned - there were also problems that mainly arose in relation to *others*, such as children, loved ones left behind and members of the host community. An aspect that was repeatedly alluded to and may have a gendered dimension

to be investigated in more detail, was worry about children and the way they were affected by migration. As one Japanese woman very movingly expressed in her reflections about the dark side of migration: “I’m worr[ied] for my children. We can’t speak Spanish. They don’t understand [what they have] to study at the school. And they don’t have friends. They tell me every morning: ‘We don’t want to go to school’” (H.O. Face-to-face workshop, 2016).<sup>16</sup>

For other participants, the problems migration caused with others expressed themselves in recurrent issues of guilt and consequent denial of suffering. Two migrants repeatedly mentioned feeling guilty because migration implied leaving their loved ones behind in search of their own well-being. When the almost inevitable struggles of migration arose, they reported telling themselves off<sup>17</sup> or inwardly hearing the voices of others, reminding them that they had *chosen* to leave their home and had to put up with it now. One participant, a Mexican who went to live abroad for a while, actually told a story, as part of the “dark side of migration”, of how she fell ill, was badly attended and felt awful as a result. Nevertheless, she never informed her family back home about this, because, in her own words, “I knew that if I told them about my bad experiences, they would tell me ‘you chose to leave...’ with a tone of reprimand y rancor” (N.C. Distance workshop, 2016).

Another issue was a sense of being discriminated and even harassed by members of the host community which severely affected one migrant’s well-being. On the whole, the women felt quite well received in Mexico, for instance, commenting on the warmth of the people/community. Nonetheless, as part of the discussion following the reflexive writing on the dark side of migration, a German living in León recounted that she was continually harassed by men at bus-stops, stared at, touched without permission, that she was once assaulted with a machete and observed 24 hours in her home by three men (H.B. Face-to-face workshop, 2016). This not only points towards serious existing threats for some migrant women in the city analyzed,<sup>18</sup> but also how the occurrence of such aggressions can, in turn, foment negative generalizations about the society that may be seen as detrimental for migrant well-being and integration. Hence, the participant commented, as a result of her traumatic experiences: “I’m through with Mexicans. I really don’t like that they don’t respect [me]” (idem).<sup>19</sup> As this brief overview has shown, the potentially negative effect of migration on well-being arising from an analysis of workshop writings and discussions, indeed seems to be highly complex, possibly affecting those leaving, those staying behind and the (host) society at large.

However, when asked, participants also mentioned many aspects of migration that seemed to significantly contribute to their well-being. This is an element which, I believe, still needs more attention, in part because, as workshop results themselves suggested, stressing the positive aspects of migration and thus emphasizing gratitude (Watkins *et al.*, 2003) may prove beneficial to migrant well-being in its own right.

Among the positive sides of migration, many referred to a form of cognitive enrichment, of getting to know different cultures and “worlds”, widening one’s horizons, understanding one’s own culture better from a distance or being pushed into a process of self-discovery. As one participant stated, also highlighting the “narrative wealth” migration provided her with (a fact which may clearly be further explored and exploited for migrant well-being by future expressive writing workshops): “The light side of migration was to narrate the feat, to discover myself in the process” (A.C. Distance Workshop, 2016).

Also, for some participants, aspects that may be commonly seen as problematic were actually experienced as positive challenges or sources of well-being and joy. Several participants indicated that they loved having to learn another language. As such, one German woman claimed she loved “to learn another language – for me it’s like learning a new world. It helps me to open my mind and heart” (H.B. Face-to-face workshop, 2016). Also, some members highlighted the pleasure – not suffering – of being seen as different. Whereas one Mexican abroad experienced this as an ambiguous pleasure<sup>20</sup> a Japanese woman living in León declared: “I love being different” (O.I. Face-to-face workshop, 2016). This is interesting, given that many migrants (and non-migrants) often suffer from their difference, especially when – as is the case of the Japanese woman – belonging to a “visible minority” (see, for instance, Noh *et al.*, 1999).

Finally - albeit not conclusively - participants quite frequently referred to the fact that the struggles usually inherent in migration eventually made them stronger. As one participant summed it up: “I think migration with all its troubles can be a great chance for growth and development. I feel that living abroad has broad[en]ed my horizon, made me more self-confident, taught me to appreciate the privileges I have, but also helped me to take a more critical look at myself and the society I come from” (B.D. Distance Workshop 2016). As these few examples illustrates, migration seems to result in a very mixed impact on well-being, calling forth much darkness and light in those who experience or are somehow affected by it. The workshops, therefore, revealed many interesting aspects in a simple manner that appears to have been experienced as beneficial by many “informants” themselves.

### *Expressive writing workshops and its impact on migrant well-being*

Having briefly looked at the way participants experienced their migration processes; I would now like to look at the way they responded to the workshop and its effect on their general well-being. On the whole, even though some points for improvement were commented upon, statements were very positive, indicating that the workshop at least had a significant short-term impact on most of the women involved. Starting with the more critical feedback, almost all of it was related to logistics of these particular workshops.<sup>21</sup> With more specific regard to Pennebaker’s methodology, it was mentioned that writing on several consecutive days proved difficult due to time constraints (O.L. Distance workshop, 2016),

a fact which I also believe to be quite problematic, wherefore workshops organized around one weekly session spread over one month or more might be worth experimenting with.<sup>22</sup> Also, one online participant was taken aback by the fact that they were, already on the first day, plunged into something so “dark” as having to confront a serious personal trauma (B.D. Distance workshop, 2016). As this feedback was received before the commencement of the face-to-face course, a slight adjustment was made. Participants were given the option to either write about difficult life events following Pennebaker’s method, or to use another, “lighter”, expressive writing exercise also potentially very relevant for migrants, namely legacy writing (e.g. Freed, 2014). When given an explicit choice, all participants opted for Pennebaker’s trauma method and no comments about its heaviness were made.

However, as said, the feedback received was on the whole very encouraging. Of course, this may be partially due to the politeness of the participants, especially after fairly intensive interaction with the workshop-facilitator over the four or five-day course period. Nevertheless, some of the responses were so “heart-felt” that – I believe – they provide information regarding the effectiveness of expressive writing workshops for the participating women. A Japanese woman wrote “I loved it so much” and drew many hearts on her evaluation sheet (O.I. Face-to-face workshop, 2016). Another participant stated: “The workshop was an excellent way to take on conflicts and traumas which we otherwise would not have dared to confront. It’s a form of therapy that helps us get along with our internal self and work on the issue of our well-being. I think it is very simple but with substantial results for our life” (F.G. 2016, Distance Workshop).

Moreover, the feedback provided some insight as to why the workshop was well-received by participants and how it affected their well-being. In contrast to the study by Baikie & Wilhelm (2005) previously mentioned, several participants highlighted how the classical expressive writing exercises had a beneficial cathartic effect. As one woman claimed: “I felt that I needed to get rid of things that were eating away at me little by little because I kept them hidden inside” (F.G. Distance workshop, 2016). This effect was ascribed, by several, to the fact that the expressive writing was entirely personal. As a result, a woman claimed that “this may work even better than speaking to someone because paper doesn’t judge” (W.K. Distance Workshop 2016). Indeed, this is partly why, for Pennebaker (Sexton & Pennebaker, 2009, pos. 7470), the hidden nature of the writing acts as an important feature.

Furthermore, the expressive writing exercises helped participants face difficult experiences (migration related or not) and with their cognitive processing. One woman stressed how she “felt able to accept and confront my problem, one that I have been fleeing from for a long time” (S.L. Distance Workshop, 2016). A Japanese woman highlighted how, through the writing “I can collect my thought” (O.N. Face-to-face workshop, 2016). Interestingly, a Mexican living in the US illustrated how, for her, the cathartic and ordering effects were interlinked: “I felt



like an unloading effect, a detachment from the part of my life that I had not managed to order before, in words” (A.C. Distance Workshop, 2016).

Another aspect, probably enhanced by the additional writing exercises, was the fact that the workshops assisted several participants in a transition from pain to acceptance and even gratitude. A woman explained that the workshop helped her understand how “sometimes the saddest experiences can turn into happy experiences” (L.E. Face-to-face workshop, 2016). Another stated, specifically with regard to migration: “It helped me, because sometimes the fact that I am far away causes home sickness [...] often I have forgotten to appreciate the treasures of migration, thinking more about what I sacrificed than what I am gaining from this experience” [M.A. Distance workshop 2016].

Also - although I have not been able to locate such a concept in existing studies on expressive writing or happiness, where more emphasis tends to be placed on social connection (e.g. Carter, 2008) - many participants highlighted the workshops’ positive effect of establishing a stronger sense of “self-connection.” A Japanese woman said how, through the workshop: “I was able to once again know me” (H.O. Face-to-face workshop 2016); a German migrant claimed that “it was very interesting to see your deepest soul in another way” (G.Z. Face-to-face workshop, 2016); and two Mexican expressed how: “I felt a connection with my inner self and that helped me to express in words what is, otherwise, very difficult to share” (N.C. Distance workshop 2016) and how the workshop helped her to “re-discover and re-construct myself” (F.G. Distance workshop 2016).

So far, I believe the results have shown that many women experienced the workshop as beneficial for their individual well-being and – at least to an extent – their individual migrant development. However, it also proved functional on a more social/collective plane. Firstly, at least in one case, the workshop resulted in a reduction of (slight) prejudice against a migrant group. This was expressed by an internal migrant resident in León who said she used to have “mixed feelings and opinions” (S.N. Face-to-face workshop, 2016) regarding Japanese immigrants, as, in her own words: “I have heard a lot of comments especially by people from León, rejecting the Japanese [...]. So listening to those comments, well, it did...no, it didn’t give me a negative but a neutral idea about Japanese migrants” (S.N. Follow-up interview, 2016). However, she emphasized how: “when I got to know them in the workshop, I realized [...] it’s a general stereotype you have and that you need to establish contact with the other person to notice that it’s not like that” (idem).

Also, the workshops proved quite effective in creating a healing sense of “common humanity” (Neff, 2011); in this case a form of intercultural understanding that made them notice similarities across cultural barriers. According to one participant, experiences like the writing workshop are “very nourishing, because we realize that there are other people who have experienced similar situations. Sometimes we think that we are the only ones who experience these kind of situations” (L.E. Face-to-face workshop 2016). Similarly, a woman emphasized how it was “very good



because we again confirmed that despite cultural differences between people from different countries, we share feelings, emotions, worries and thoughts” (G.L. Face-to-face workshop 2016). Both the reduction of prejudice and this sense of shared humanity may be regarded as conducive to the integration part of migrant well-being and development.

Hence, despite some difficulties, the two expressive writing workshops seem to have been experienced as beneficial for many participants’ well-being, both on an individual and more collective plane. Albeit thorough follow-up studies are as yet missing and the methodology’s deliberate qualitative orientation does not allow for generalizations, it seems that expressive writing workshops may indeed be very promising, cost-effective local cultural policy measures to enhance migrant well-being and development.

## CONCLUSION

The present article has thus argued that cultural policy interventions are urgently needed to confront this world’s ever more pressing “migrant crisis”. Among many other difficulties, migrants face serious threats to their well-being, caused in part by problems inherent to displacement itself, as well as related to a possibly prejudiced reception by host societies. Both elements can also be regarded as serious hindrances towards migrant well-being and the arguably related notions of integration and development. The research conducted was based both on the practical implementation of writing workshops and, as said, on theoretical notions drawn from different areas such as cultural policy studies, general migrants studies, creative and expressive writing studies, studies on happiness, well-being and development, as well as psychological and psychoanalytical accounts of migration. This interdisciplinary approach made it possible to analyze the possibility of using expressive writing workshops in order to increase migrant well-being, integration and development, possibly reduce prejudice and start to produce additional qualitative information regarding under-researched migrant groups. Taking seriously the Migration Policy Institute recommendation that local policies based on the “active interaction between immigrants and local society should receive the highest priority” (Penninx, 2003, Recognize the local context, para. 1), these questions were, for the moment, tested with regard to two expressive writing workshops centering around the city of León, Mexico.

Despite the fact that, as implied earlier on, there are evident limitations to these findings,<sup>23</sup> I believe the research conducted revealed the strong potential of using expressive writing workshops to enhance insight into the psychology of migrants from different groups, as well as enhance migrant well-being, integration and development. Participants appreciated functions achieved by the writing such as catharsis, cognitive ordering, a renewed sense of self-connection, a deconstruction of cultural stereotypes and a deeper comprehension of similarities with others, regardless of their cultural background. Thus, similar workshops may

indeed be considered as efficient and cost-effective measures to improve development in the form of well-being and integration. In fact, the latter – especially in the case of the face-to-face workshops and, for instance, the creation of a connected Facebook pages – can also directly help to create networks among migrant and non-migrant participants.

Although the interventions studied were small-scale, I think they contribute to a deeper understanding of how the arts may be ideally placed to assist many forms of migrant development and, hence, why cultural policies need to urgently take on the challenge of increasing their focus on this growing and in some contexts growingly vulnerable group. For, as Frith (1996) has also shown with regard to music, I believe the arts often possess the ability to create enticing bridges between the individual and the collective, between a unique, self-expressing “I” and a socially integrated “we”. In this manner, they seem to be able to accommodate the paradox at the heart of our world’s every increasing confrontation with cultural diversity; the profound co-existence and need for human difference and unity. I hope many more cultural policies will take up the challenge and use the arts’ potential in a battle for seeing the “light side” of migration, both among migrants themselves and their host communities.

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## Notes

- 1 This work was supported by the Research Program UNAM-DGAPA-PAPIIT [Grant number: IN405116].
- 2 Unfortunately, I have not been able to obtain more recent figures, which arguably points towards a lack of accessible and regularly updated research on the subject in its own right.
- 3 At this stage, it is important to re-emphasize that the research conducted forms part of a larger project on the benefits of expressive writing workshops for migrant women and that the present article reports on initial findings. Future workshops will pay closer emphasis to variances of migrant experiences due to socio-economic and ethnic differences. Also, and in direct relation, it will include work with particularly vulnerable groups such as indigenous and Central American migrants and refugees.
- 4 As said, future investigations focusing on the use of expressive writing for these groups would certainly be useful, even though it may be argued that in this case public policies of a more “practical” kind, addressing ways to guarantee their basic human rights, are of a more pressing nature.
- 5 As the expressive writing workshop revealed, even though many migrants perceive themselves as very well treated by the host population, some Germans and Japanese migrants also do not always feel well received.
- 6 The third day, due to various time constraints, was without face-to-face contact; a Facebook group was established and participants asked to complete this day’s task on their own.
- 7 Due to the limited scope of the present work, the comparison will not presently be analyzed.
- 8 The decision to mix both groups was motivated by the attempt – in harmony with the research project as a whole - to balance both individual and social benefits of expressive writing. Significantly, however – and possibly in part due to their interest in the subject in the first place - it turned out that the differences between migrants and non-migrants became increasingly blurry as the workshops proceeded. Non-migrants had been defined as nationals residing in their home territory. But it turned out the majority of members of this group had either experienced internal migration or lived abroad for some period of time, wherefore many of them responded to migration as a personal experience they shared. This, in turn, seemed to have contributed to the emergence of a sense of “common humanity” among workshops participants



which I will discuss in more detail later on. While future studies could opt to eliminate this “blurring effect” by strictly recruiting locals without any experiences of migration, I believe this might falsely limit the inherent complexity of the issue of migration as well as cut-down on the evolving sense of empathy.

- 9 Of the former, 11 participated until the end and five dropped out due to various (personal) reasons; with regard to the local work-shop, two participants dropped out, one because of lack of time, the other for reasons unknown.
- 10 Here, the project’s association with the local German cultural center proved very helpful, also logistically, as the center provided an accessible meeting space, free of charge.
- 11 There were ideological/academic reasons behind this choice, even though this could not be fully teased out during this pilot project. Presently, a lot of immigration research still focuses on a neat division of nation states, exploring how migrants from particular nations are received by other nations. While this is a valid and interesting form of research, I think it does not pay full attention to the fact that migration has become far “messier” than this. Apart from the fact that on-line technologies like the one used allow migrants to maintain strong (identity) ties to their homeland, many migrants are, in fact, multiple migrants (Bhachu, 2015). This was shown by the workshop participants itself. At least five of them had been migrants in different nations.
- 12 German was used, as it is my mother-tongue. It may be added that this mixture between the use of shared and different languages can be seen as a feature that makes these kinds of workshops suitable for migrants in its own right, resulting in a practical as well as symbolic capacity to mediate between private and public worlds, as well as between social diversity and emergent unity.
- 13 One participant stated that, as a personal development measure, one should answer a questionnaire on well-being at least once a week (A.C. Distance workshop, 2016), whereas another named the reflexive writing on the “light side” of migration as her most valuable workshop experience, because it helped her to counter-act the fact that “we sometimes forget the beautiful sides of life” (S.N. Face-to-face workshop, 2016).
- 14 All answers not originally given in English are my translations.
- 15 In fact, in one discussion group, a woman commented that the biggest lake of the city was mainly filled by her tears, she cried so much due to loneliness and other struggles on arriving in León (A.R., Face-to-face workshop, 2016).
- 16 Slight corrections were made of the original which is: “I’m worry for my children. We can’t speak Spanish. They don’t understand to study at the school. And they don’t have friends. They speak me every morning: ‘We don’t want to go to school’”. (Y. H. Face-to-face workshop, 2016).
- 17 “One can simply feel bad physically and/or emotionally...when something like this happens or happened it’s difficult to control that small voice in your head that says: ‘you wanted to leave and get to know [a different country], this is part of the same, now put up with it.’” (O.Z. Distance workshop, 2016).
- 18 Even though further studies would be needed to corroborate this claim, it seems this woman in particular suffered in part because, being Caucasian, blond, blue-eyed and young, she possibly reflects the sexualized, Mexican ideal of the foreign and “light” looking woman, the “güera” (see, for instance, Torres, 2016).
- 19 It has to be added that other participants had very different experiences of reception by the host society. Another woman said that she loved being seen as “perfect” because she was German (A.R. Face-to-face workshop 2016).
- 20 In her own words: “one of the fun things of being a migrant is feeling different (even though this can also turn into a problem).” (S. C. Distance workshop 2016).
- 21 A Japanese woman with very little knowledge of English or Spanish understandably pleaded for the presence of an interpreter on the occasion of



another face-to-face workshop (“If there is an interpretation I will be saved,” O. N. 2016) and said she would have enjoyed the participation of women from more diverse international backgrounds (id.). Two had technical difficulties with the on-line platform which somewhat discouraged them. Both on-line and face-to-face participants commented that they would have enjoyed more personal interaction than the workshop set-up provided through the forum and discussion groups.

- 22 While these would depart quite significantly from Pennebaker’s core method, they might show increased attendance and improved social benefits due to the possible creation of more solid social networks among participants, especially within a face-to-face context.
- 23 Future workshops are planned to remedy some of these. In fact, apart from interventions that focus more profoundly on socio-economical and ethnic differences among migrants and on particularly vulnerable groups such as indigenous and Central American migrants, it may also be very revealing to work with refugees and, generally, more displaced people living in other nations, including Mexican immigrants (both legal and “illegal”) in the US. Also, I believe it will be valuable for future research to experiment with the adaptation of the expressive writing methodology for non-literary migrants. For the moment, I believe this may be achieved through more intense group discussions instead of questionnaires and possibly the use of self-recording (i.e. assuring that they are beyond hearing distance, they can speak about their traumas into a recording device and may subsequently delete their words).

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